

societies. They copied and stored the books, interpreted them to others, and even served the secular needs of their governments for recording important events and documents. Today in many third-world countries public scribes sit at tables in the villages and great cities, reading and writing for their neighbors. It's ironic that some countries with a long history of literacy, are among the nations with the highest rates of illiteracy.

Let me bring this all back to one central premise: reading is language, no less and no more than listening is language. People learn both in the same ways and for the same reasons.



*In the case of Ambedkar Nagar in Delhi, the discourse of literacy has been located in the superficial context of reading bus numbers or avoiding being cheated at the ration shop. Why is it not located in . . . the real living conditions of the poverty-stricken people of Ambedkar Nagar—highly restricted milk supply which seems to regulate their daily timetable, lack of sanitation, proper drainage and medical facilities and highly limited and irregular water supply. It does not make much sense to say that these problems will be looked into in the post-literacy stage. There is obviously an underlying assumption here that the acquisition of literacy will automatically resolve these problems. The evidence in this direction is nonexistent. The whole enterprise of literacy needs to be located in a struggle to eliminate these problems which those in power have created for the powerless.*

—R. K. Agnihotri



### ***Literacy As Human Right: Literacy Practices in Brazil***

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An analysis of the history of education in Brazil shows that the most prevailing concept of literacy in the country is that it is a fundamental tool for the cultural development of human beings and that it is the right of every citizen. Literacy has been historically understood as a form of human activity to which all human beings are entitled; thus it goes beyond being an exclusively central issue in schooling and a factor in economic development.

Educational movements in Brazil have been the result of social movements in which different sectors of society have participated. Unions, com-



munity organizations, churches, political parties, private educational institutions, have all been very active in developing literacy, both in and out of school. Literacy programs (most of them for adults) that take place outside schools are common and affect how literacy development is seen in institutional settings.

The last decade has been one of upheaval in education, with a strong emphasis on developing pedagogical actions within the schools that integrate the experiences of popular education and adult literacy programs. This pedagogy envisions the empowerment of people through the appropriation of formal knowledge and the development of forms of action incorporating funds of knowledge and culturally developed behaviors already available in the community. It is a pedagogy that integrates the cultural development of students and teachers into the teaching/learning process.

Two main assumptions underlie many of the recent literacy practices developed in Brazil. The first is that literacy depends on culturally appropriate pedagogical practices; the second is that literacy is considered primarily a factor of cultural and social development, not economic development.

Pedagogical practices coherent with those assumptions are those that combine an investigation of literacy practices in the community with language development in the classroom. Uses of oral and written language found in the community can thus be integrated into the classroom. For example, when keeping and sharing a journal or a little book of reminders is a major way in which language is used in the community, the teacher may use this form to introduce literacy practice in the classroom, moving on later to more scholarly uses of written language such as taking notes.

Another aspect is the development of literacy connected to its use as a tool for learning other subjects. Thus there are a number of initiatives that articulate literacy in history, literacy in the sciences, literacy in math. Language is nonetheless seen as a subject in itself, which means that the structure of language as well as the broadening uses of literacy has to be revealed to the students. All forms of working in, reporting on, and reflecting on other subjects also become part of literacy development.

To approach literacy as a process of cultural development has an important consequence: since literacy is socially constructed, both participants in that construction—student and teacher—are equally important pieces of the process. Thus adults/teachers are simultaneously agents for literacy development and subjects of the literacy-oriented action. Rethinking their role in the process may be a major difficulty for teachers, since they have been educated to think that they act to foster students' knowledge acquisition, not that their pedagogy acts upon themselves. To focus on literacy as empowerment and/or to adopt the premise that construction of meaning is facilitated by culturally based pedagogy prompts teachers to reason, to think critically.

Seeing literacy in this perspective—empowerment through culturally based pedagogy—raises the issue of teacher education. Urgent changes have



to be made both in the curriculum and the methodology of teacher education programs. Teachers need to be prepared for dynamic classroom action that involves a series of decisions about language and language uses. They must also learn to think about themselves as literate people within a process of cultural development. Recent educational reforms in Brazil have revealed some intriguing aspects of cultural development in relation to the awareness that can be achieved through written language. Especially interesting is the role of writing. Journals and stories can be powerful tools for understanding one's own concepts about children and one's attitudes toward social classes, cultural behaviors, and ethnic and racial diversities.

Through the more active and inclusive nature of our literacy practices, we in Brazil have advanced from the "pedagogy of the oppressed" to the "pedagogy of the excluded," to use Florestan Fernandes's terminology. Comprehensive literacy development has become a priority for many Brazilian educators. And this comprehensive approach means thinking of literacy as a multiple form of human activity.



# **many families, many literacies**

*an international declaration of principles*

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